

## THIRD CORPS

(10,626 MEN / 30 GUNS)

MAJOR GENERAL  
DANIEL EDGAR SICKLES



In neither army was there another man with a past as garish as Dan Sickles. He was not a trained soldier—he had “graduated” from the rigors of New York City’s Tammany politics rather than those of West Point—but by sheer audacity and aggressiveness, this heavy drinking, womanizing, and scheming soldier had risen farther than any other political general in the Army of the Potomac.

Despite his controversial nature, his legions of detractors, who included General Meade, could not deny Sickles possessed some talent and immense personal courage. Colonel Regis de Trobriand, one of Sickles’ brigadiers, called attention in his memoirs to his other admirable qualities:

*He was gifted in a high degree with that multiplicity of faculties which has given rise to the saying that a Yankee is ready for everything. He has a quick perception, an energetic will, prompt and supple intelligence, an active temperament. Naturally ambitious, he brings to*

*the service of his ambitions a clear view, a practical judgment and a deep knowledge of political tactics. When he has determined on anything, he prepares the way, assembles his forces, and marches directly to the assault.*

*Obstacles do not discourage him. . . he has many strings in his bow, if one breaks he will replace it by another. In him, ability does not exclude frankness. He likes, on the contrary, to play with his cards on the table with his friends and against his enemies.*

Sickles was born on October 20, 1819, in New York City, the son of a well-to-do patent lawyer. He showed his swaggering self-confidence and contrary nature at a young age by repeatedly running away from home. His dissolute lifestyle of hanging out with prostitutes and other unsavory characters—habits which would stay with him throughout his life—began at a young age. Sickles eventually entered New York University, but later left to study law. About this time he began his long association with Tammany Hall’s Democratic politics in New York City. In 1843, at the age of twenty-four, he was admitted to the bar and was elected to the New York State Assembly in 1847, where he was known to escort prostitutes into the legislative chambers. He married in 1852, and true to his irascible nature, the union was tinged with controversy: his bride was sixteen and Sickles was twice her age.

Sickles’ political career rose to the national level, and he spent a year abroad as secretary to the minister to Great Britain, where he scandalized the host country by refusing to toast the health of Queen Victoria at an Independence Day banquet. Returning to America, Sickles became a militia officer and was elected a state senator in 1855, and then became a member of Congress in 1856. Sickles, was a states’ rights Democrat with a prosperous law practice, set his sights on nothing less than the presidency. For someone of such high ambition, he made no effort to curb his excessive lifestyle. He lived far beyond his means, continued his lecherous

indiscretions, and made himself a notorious figure in D. C. society. Then, in 1859, he shot and killed Philip Barton Key.

Key was the son of the author of "The Star-Spangled Banner," a militia captain, political dabbler, and man-about-town in the capital, where he was known as "the handsomest man in all Washington society." Key had legal business with Sickles, and after a while began trysting with Sickles' wife in a shabby apartment. Sickles found out about the affair and shot Key dead in Lafayette Park—just across the street from the White House. After the shooting, Sickles calmly walked down the street and surrendered himself to the Attorney General of the United States. At his murder trial, Sickles was defended by a phalanx of lawyers, including the future Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. His defense, for the first time in recorded history, was the plea of "temporary insanity." Sickles was triumphantly acquitted. Sickles finally committed the scandal that ruined his future in Washington when he publicly forgave his wife. Mary Chesnut, the famous Southern diarist, watched him from the House gallery one day and described a man totally ostracized, carefully avoided by every other man on the floor, "left alone as if he had the smallpox."

Sickles returned to New York and had just resumed practicing law when the war broke out in April 1861. He realized that the war offered him a chance to retrieve his prominence by becoming a military hero, and so he decided to raise a regiment. Recruiting handbills were printed and volunteers began to appear. Sickles realized that a man who mustered in the most soldiers stood the best chance of getting a brigadier general's star from Congress, and so he raised an entire brigade, dubbing it the "Excelsior Brigade."

With characteristic impudence, Sickles considered it his brigade, independent of New York state authority. As an independent military organization, however, it was supposed to pay its own way, and debts began piling up immediately. Sickles, an old hand at high-level mooching from his Tammany days, got permission to move part of the brigade to Staten Island, and managed to shelter his Excelsiors in a circus tent loaned

by none other than P. T. Barnum. Another fourteen hundred men were quartered in a vacant hall on lower Broadway. Sickles contracted with a bathhouse to give them all a wash and shave at ten cents each. After seeing to these arrangements, he began pestering Lincoln and everyone he knew in Washington to swear his troops in as United States volunteers. The governor of New York was outraged at Sickles' attempt to place New York volunteers beyond his authority and he tried to disband the brigade. It required a general order from the Secretary of War to force Sickles to place the Excelsior Brigade under the governor's control, and the regiments were mustered in as the 70th, 71st, 72nd, 73rd, and 74th New York Volunteers. After First Bull Run, as the embattled Lincoln administration began crying out for more troops, Sickles' brigade was put on a train for the capital, where it would eventually join the Army of the Potomac. The maneuvering politico was sworn in as a brigadier general.

Sickles had the immediate good fortune of finding himself in Brig. Gen. Joseph Hooker's division. Hooker, a grand attention-seeker himself, rose through the ranks, and Sickles' star rose as well. Sickles was absent (characteristically pulling strings in Washington) during his brigade's first fight in the spring of 1862 at Williamsburg—its heaviest combat on the Virginia Peninsula. He was also absent during the Second Battle of Bull Run in August 1862. In the army reorganization following that battle, Hooker rose to command the First Corps, and Sickles took charge of Hooker's old division in the Third Corps. On November 29, 1862, the New Yorker was promoted to major general.

It was a testament to Sickles' political talents that in an army rife with backbiting, he risen from being a civilian to the rank of major general and command of a corps within two short years. As shown, he often left his troops in the field to hurry to Washington to curry favor in person, and he had assiduously courted the friendship of the President and Mrs. Lincoln. However adept he had proven himself to be at functioning within the army's political environment, however, he was always under scrutiny

because of his lack of military knowledge. Brigadier General Gouverneur Warren, chief engineer of the Army of the Potomac, believed that Sickles was not as good a soldier as others of his rank, and would be a poor choice to fight an independent battle—as corps commanders sometimes were called upon to do. Warren later admitted that Sickles did the “best he could, and with the corps he had managed very well.”

At the Battle of Fredericksburg the next month, Sickles' division remained in reserve and saw little action. When Hooker was named as the new commander of the Army of the Potomac in January 1863, Sickles' heyday had finally arrived. Despite his lack of substantive combat experience, Hooker liked Sickles' aggressive nature and attitude and he placed him in command of the Third Corps on February 5, 1863. Many of the regular army officers expressed dismay at his advancement, for Sickles was the only non-West Pointer among the seven corps chiefs; a sour mood spread over the officer corps. Others complained that Sickles' undisciplined personal impulses (together with Hooker's and Dan Butterfield's) were quickly imbuing army headquarters with the air of a combination bar and brothel.

It wasn't until Chancellorsville in May 1863 that Sickles finally saw heavy combat. He had moved his corps aggressively forward to punish the tail end of what appeared to be Stonewall Jackson's retreating column. Instead, Jackson was marching to crush the right flank of the army, which he did in magnificent style. Sickles found himself in control of important high ground at Hazel Grove and a fierce round of combat ensued. Hooker eventually ordered him to abandon the position, a tactical mistake which cost the Third Corps substantial losses. Sickles' experience in the tangled thickets at Chancellorsville seemed to vindicate his aggressive behavior, taught him the value of holding high ground, and jaundiced his view of higher authority. All three of these factors would color his actions at Gettysburg.

When Hooker was suddenly replaced with Maj. Gen. George Meade as the army's new commander just a few days before Gettys-

burg, a new faction of officers took control of the reins of power. Meade detested Sickles' personal habits and distrusted his lack of military education. The New Yorker was near the top of Meade's enemy's list. To make matters worse for Sickles, the march toward the battlefield was full of frustrating starts, stops, and delays, and Meade blamed him for more than his share of those problems. Sickles also resented the autonomy he lost when Meade empowered First Corps commander John Reynolds to oversee the First, Third, and the Eleventh Corps. By the time Sickles reached the field, relations between himself and Meade were acutely uncomfortable.

GETTYSBURG: While the battle of July 1 was being fought on the ridges west of Gettysburg, Sickles was with his Third Corps at Emmitsburg, ten miles to the south. He received two sets of orders there, one from Meade (to remain in Emmitsburg and guard the left flank of the army), and another from John Reynolds (to hurry north to Gettysburg). Though Sickles' irritation with Meade increased with this discrepancy in orders, he handled the situation well. He notified headquarters of the incongruity of the directives and detached one brigade from each of his two divisions to stay in Emmitsburg. With the balance of his corps (four brigades), Sickles marched to Gettysburg. Major General David Birney, the commander of the Third Corps' First Division, started two brigades of his division northward in mid-afternoon and arrived on the lower end of Cemetery Ridge a little after 6:00 p.m. Second Division leader Brig. Gen. Andrew A. Humphreys arrived at Gettysburg with two more brigades about midnight. Sickles spent the evening of July 1 encamped near his men.

On the morning of July 2, Sickles' last two brigades rejoined him on the southern end of the field, and his corps took up its assigned position south of Winfield Hancock's Second Corps on Cemetery Ridge. Sickles' men extended the Union army's left flank all the way to Little Round Top. Sickles rode to army headquarters at about 11:00 a.m., still unsure about the exact ground his infantry should occupy. Meade, however, was seem-

ingly preoccupied with the Union army's right, and Sickles—justifiably concerned about the left flank—received the impression he was being ignored or slighted.

The politician-turned-general had learned the hard way about the importance of high ground at Chancellorsville, and he disliked the fact that the position assigned to him by Meade was forty feet lower than the Emmitsburg Road, a thoroughfare about a mile west of his present position that ran in a line roughly parallel to his front. He also didn't like the fact that the continuity of his present position was broken up by woods and rock formations. As a result, he made one of the most controversial decisions of the entire war: he abandoned the position assigned to him by Meade and moved his entire corps forward to the high ground. His alignment was a giant, wide V-shaped front with the point of the V aiming west from a small peach orchard along the Emmitsburg Road. Humphrey's division was deployed along the road on the right of the corps, with Birney's divisional line angling off to the southeast.

Grave problems with this new position became immediately apparent. Both of Sickles' flanks were now in the air, since the Second Corps had remained on Cemetery Ridge, hundreds of yards behind his right rear, and the commanding position of Little Round Top was too far to the east (behind him) to provide a topographical anchor for his left. Compounding these problems was the fact that Sickles' elongated new line bulged out in a salient at the Peach Orchard, where it could be struck from three directions (west, southwest, and northwest). Although Sickles sought approval for his new dispositions, the enemy attacked before he could be either withdrawn or reinforced.

The assault was launched late on the afternoon of July 2 when James Longstreet's charging Confederate brigades moved forward against Sickles thinly-spread troops. Within an hour the Peach Orchard salient was demolished, the Third Corps was overwhelmed and falling back, and the massive Confederate assault was moving east toward the Round Tops. At about 6:00 p.m., Sickles abandoned his threatened headquarters.

During the evacuation his right knee was grazed by a cannonball, too lightly to spook his horse but hard enough to shatter his leg. He was carried off in a stretcher with his cap over his eyes. To let the men know that he was alive, he puffed ostentatiously on a cigar as aides bore him to the rear.

Sickles' right leg was amputated just above the knee a few hours later, and his days as a field commander were over. Some would say the loss of his leg helped cast him a hero for the cause of Union, despite the fact his decision to move to the Emmitsburg Road had led to the virtual destruction of the Third Corps. Others contend the movement helped absorb Longstreet's attack well in advance of the Round Tops, allowing reinforcements to hold the heights while Sickles' men bore the brunt of the attack.

Sickles retired from U.S. Army in 1869 with the rank of major general, whereupon President Grant appointed him minister to Spain. There, true to form, he became a lover of Queen Isabella. After a return to Congress in 1893-1895, he was removed from the New York Monuments Commission in 1912 for alleged embezzlement. He died of a stroke in 1914, separated from his family, "irresponsible, and cantankerous."

---

*For further reading:*

Pfanz, Harry W. *Gettysburg: The Second Day*. Chapel Hill, 1987.

Pinchon, Edgcumb. *Dan Sickles: Hero of Gettysburg, "Yankee King of Spain."* New York, 1945.

Robertson, William Glenn. "The Peach Orchard Revisited: Daniel E. Sickles and the Third Corps on July 2, 1863," in Gary Gallagher, ed. *The Second Day at Gettysburg*. Kent, 1993.

Sauers, Richard Allen. *A Caspian Sea of Ink: The Meade-Sickles Controversy*. Baltimore, 1989.

Stevenson, James. *History of the Excelsior or Sickles' Brigade*. Paterson, 1863.

Swanberg, W. A. *Sickles the Incredible*. New York, 1956.